

Compliance Bulletin

Solid Waste

Household Medical Waste

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

reviewed/revised August 2011

Although household generated waste is currently exempt from the state's infectious waste regulations, the following guidance is provided as best management practices. This information is intended only as a guide and does not replace the regulations or any local requirements.

What is household medical waste?

Household medical waste is any waste that is generated as a result of health care activities in the home. It includes bandages, hypodermic needles, lancets and unused medications, among other things.

Why should I be concerned about the handling of medical waste from my home?

In general, medical wastes generated in the home are not a serious health concern. One exception, however, is if the medical waste is an unused medication that could cause harm if used inappropriately by someone it was not intended for. Another exception is if the medical waste is an infectious waste. An infectious waste is any medical waste that is capable of causing disease in another human being if that person comes into contact with it. For example, wastes that are contaminated with blood or other body fluids from people who have infectious diseases. Infectious diseases, like HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B, are serious and can be fatal. That is why caution is necessary when handling any infectious wastes in your home. Steps should be taken to protect yourself, care givers, and the people who handle your household waste after it leaves your home.

How can I dispose of unwanted medicines and prescription drugs?

It is important to dispose of unused or unwanted household medications in a safe and environmentally sound manner. Proper disposal of medications can help prevent accidental poisoning and limit opportunities for intentional misuse. **Never flush medications down the toilet or drain.** Flushing sends them to rivers, lakes and streams causing potential harm to aquatic life and drinking water supplies. When disposing of medications, please follow the simple steps listed below:

1. Take advantage of medication take-back programs or events that allow you to bring unused medications to a central location for proper disposal. You can find out about these programs or events by:
 - a. Calling (303-692-2903) or visiting the website (www.coloradomedtakeback.info) of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Medication Take-Back Pilot Project to see if there is a collection box in your area. Please note that this program **does not accept** narcotics or other controlled substances, but will accept other prescription medications, over-the-counter medications, pet medications, vitamins and medicated ointments or lotions. If you are unsure if your medication is a controlled substance, ask your pharmacist.
 - b. Calling or visiting the website of your local city or county government for information. Please note that local programs or events **may or may not accept** narcotics or other controlled substances.

- c. Visiting the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) website (www.dea.gov) for information on their next drug take-back event. Please note that this program **does accept** narcotics and other controlled substances.
 - d. Visiting the National Community Pharmacists Association (NCPA) website (www.DisposeMyMeds.org) for information on local independent pharmacies offering medication disposal programs.
2. If a local collection program or event is not available, or if the program or event does not accept narcotics or other controlled substances – **do not flush!** Instead, dispose of the medications in the trash as follows:
- a. Take unused, unneeded or expired medicines out of their original containers. Mix them with an undesirable substance such as used coffee grounds or kitty litter.
 - b. Remove or destroy all identifying personal information, including prescription number, on the empty medicine container labels. You can destroy personal information by covering it with black permanent marker or by scratching it off.
 - c. Wrap the medication mixture and the empty containers in newspaper to help conceal them and place them in the trash.
 - d. Be sure to keep children and pets away from the trash before it is picked up and hauled away.

For more information on the proper disposal of household medications, visit www.smarxtdisposal.net .

What should I do with my other household medical wastes?

Household medical waste is considered solid waste and should be disposed of at a permitted municipal solid waste landfill like any other type of household waste. If you think the medical waste you are generating in your home may be infectious, the Department recommends that you either treat the waste in a way that makes it no longer infectious, or properly package the waste to reduce the risk of exposing others to possible infection. Properly treated or packaged household medical waste can be added to your general household waste to be picked up by your trash hauler, or otherwise transported to a permitted disposal facility.

How do I properly package infectious wastes for disposal?

The Department recommends the following guidelines for managing infectious wastes generated in the home.

Sharps (syringes, pen needles, lancets, broken glass with blood, etc.)

1. Place the waste in a strong plastic or metal container with a screw-on or tightly secured lid. Clearly label the container with the word “Sharps” or “Biohazard Waste.” Or you may purchase a commercially available puncture resistant and leak-proof sharps container.

Although not required, you may disinfect the sharps prior to disposal by using common household disinfectants. For example, a mixture of one-eighth cup chlorine bleach in 1/2 gallon of water is an effective disinfecting solution. This solution should be kept in contact with the sharps for at least one minute before draining off and carefully disposing of the solution down the drain. The sharps should not be disposed of down the drain.

From a practical standpoint, any type of sharp medical waste should be sealed in a puncture resistant container whether it is infectious or not. This will protect family members and waste handlers from possible cuts or punctures.

2. Seal the container. If using a purchased sharps container, seal the container following the manufacturer's instructions.
3. Ensure that the outside of the container is free of visible contamination.
4. Place the sealed container in the trash. **Do not put containers of sharps in with your recyclables. SHARPS ARE NOT RECYCLABLE.**

Sharps may also be disposed of through a sharps collection program (available for residents of Mesa, El Paso, or Larimer counties by contacting the local solid waste authorities), a sharps mail-back program, or medical waste disposal company.

Contaminated bandages, dressings, etc.

Contaminated bandages, dressings, garments, linens and other soft goods should be disposed of in a securely fastened plastic bag or wrapped in sheet plastic that is sealed with strong tape to prevent exposure. Ensure that the outside of the package is free of visible contamination. Once secured, the packaged waste can be placed in your regular trash.

What is the risk of putting used sharps directly in the trash?

Disposing of your used sharps loosely in the trash puts your family, trash haulers, and landfill employees at risk of infection and physical injuries from needle sticks and cuts. Unsuspecting people, pets and wild animals can also come in contact with sharps. While you may know that you don't have an infectious disease, others outside your home won't. A needle stick may subject the injured person to a post-exposure evaluation and preventative treatment.

I have a full red biohazard sharps container that I need to get rid of and the pharmacy/doctors office that provided it to me will not take it back. How can I dispose of it?

Contact the manufacturer of the biohazard container to see if they have a mail-back or drop off program and if it can be returned that way. If not, since these containers are puncture resistant, the labeled and sealed container can go into your regular trash.

Do I have to use a mail-back program or medical waste company to dispose of my used needles?

No, households are not required to use a mail-back program or medical waste disposal company to dispose of their used needles and sharps, but it is a good option in order to protect your family, trash haulers, and workers at the landfill.

Do you have a list of companies that offer a used sharps mail-back program?

The "Mail-back Programs for Mercury, Lighting, Dental, Medical and Electronics Wastes" list is available on the Hazardous Materials and Waste Management Division's website. The following companies specifically provide mail-back services for sharps and other medical wastes.

Medical Waste Mail Back Services

AllegroMedical.com www.allegromedical.com	(800) 861-3211
Becton-Dickinson http://www.bd.com/us/diabetes/	(800) 219-7174 ext. 2223
EnviroMed Safety and Compliance www.enviromedinc.com	(877) 340-2430
GRP & Associates www.sharpsdisposal.com	(800) 207-0976
Medasend Biomedical www.medasend.com	(800) 200-3581
Sharps Compliance Inc. www.sharpsinc.com	(800) 772-5657
Stericycle, Inc. www.stericycle.com/sharps-disposal.html	(866) 783-7422
WCM (Waste and Compliance Management, Inc.) www.homesharpsdisposal.com	(866) 436-9264
Waste Management, Inc. medwaste.wm.com	(866) 699-6466
XMED Disposal, Inc. www.xmeddisposal.com	(866) 735-9709

Can used test strips (e.g. diabetic) go into the regular trash?

Used test strips should be placed in a securely fastened plastic bag (for example, a zip-top sandwich bag) before disposal in your trash. You may also put used test strips in your sharps container if you dispose of it in your household trash. Some mail-back programs also allow disposal of used test strips in with the sharps.

For more information, please contact:

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment
Hazardous Materials and Waste Management Division
4300 Cherry Creek Drive South
Denver, Colorado 80246-1530



Customer Technical Assistance Line
(303) 692-3320
(888) 569-1831 ext. 3320 toll-free
E-mail: comments.hmwmd@state.co.us
Website: www.colorado.gov/cdphe/hm

This guidance is intended to serve only as guidance to persons interested in the management of household medical waste in Colorado. This guidance should be consulted in conjunction with the Solid Waste Regulations at 6 CCR 1007-2, Part 1, Regulations Pertaining to Solid Waste Sites and Facilities.